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Abstract

This essay explores the ways in which the widespread craze for reality TV has now extended its contamination to the comparatively more traditional discipline of literature. Today, there is no use denying that, acknowledging, and internalizing, the American domination in the creation of reality shows, French television has followed suit and, as a result of the cultural flooding of such a model, recent French literature has also been swayed by the empire of television in general, and the power of reality TV in particular. The author delineates the increasingly porous frontier separating and conjoining reality TV and literary representation, questions the adoption and consecration of banality as the basic principle of this porosity, and examines the consequences of such a sustained exposure to images of a trite reality on the quality of traditional cultural artifacts such as books. Among other aspects of this transfer, the essay focuses on the effect of the strange and voyeuristic interdependence of cameras, men and their plain reality. Ultimately, the essay wonders why, in all forms of cultural representation, high or low, a spectacle of great banality has now been elevated to the rank of acclaimed cultural production.

Keywords

French fiction, reality TV, French literature, culture, literary representation

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Contemporary French Fiction In and Out of Screens

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> Annie Hall: God, it's so clean out here [in Beverly Hills].
>
> Alvy: They don't throw their garbage away. They make it into television shows.
>
> Woody Allen
>
> Today reality TV … has contaminated all the other genres.
>
> François Jost

In an era of insatiable appetite for images of reality (an expression that already tells a tale), it was just a matter of time before reality TV would contaminate other media, not only those involved in the production and dissemination of images but also those derived from the republic of letters. This essay explores the ways in which the widespread craze for reality TV has now extended its contamination to the comparatively more traditional discipline of literature. Today, there is no use denying that, acknowledging and internalizing the American domination in the creation of reality shows, French television has followed suit and, as a result of the cultural flooding of such a model, recent French literature has also been swayed by the empire of television in general, and the power of reality TV in particular. This article delineates the increasingly porous frontier separating and conjoining reality TV and literary representation, questions the adoption and consecration of banality as the basic principle of this porosity, and examines the consequences of such a sustained exposure to images of a trite reality on the quality of traditional cultural artifacts such as books. Among other aspects of this transfer I focus on the effect of the strange and voyeuristic

interdependence of cameras, humans, and their plain reality. Ultimately, I wonder why, in all forms of cultural representation, high or low, a spectacle of great banality has now been elevated to the rank of acclaimed cultural production.

There has been such an influx of literature taking television and reality TV as its central theme recently that it's almost impossible to give an exhaustive list of all concerned titles. However, to indicate the extent of what this essay refers to as this contamination, a sampling is offered here of the vast and growing field of French literature that has been inspired by reality TV.

First, the field of children's and young adult literature has produced a number of moralistic tales about the danger of reality TV. This is the case of Gudule (Anne Duguël when she writes for adults), a prolific author of books for young adults whose 2001 *Regardez-moi* 'Look at Me' tells the story of Gina, an adolescent whose dream to become a celebrity on a reality show finally comes true. As expected, her dream gradually deteriorates into a nightmare as Gina, who originally craved the eye of the camera, now tries to escape its tyrannical and relentless gaze.

Reflecting the recent quality of the phenomenon, a number of relatively successful first novels offer a glimpse into the world of crime on the sets of reality TV shows. In 2006 Grégoire Hervier published *Scream test*, a "slasher-gore thriller" in which viewers witness the humiliation and murder of kidnapped candidates forced to participate in a reality show on the Internet. The last survivor will become the winner of the show with his/her own spared life as the ultimate reward. Hervier deplores and criticizes the power of ubiquity of reality TV and sees its perverse and excessive tendency towards an incurable scopophilia as more condemnable than the crimes themselves. Another first novel, *Blood Story*, (2008) by Eugénie Chidlin, gives a science fiction twist to the world of reality TV, anticipating trash TV in the year 2012 and quickly transforming the apparently idealistic setting of the villa where the game will be played into a dystopic and violent world where crime is sadistically ordered by the spectators and primitively performed by the participants.

For the more established writers, such as Amélie Nothomb (*Acide Sulfurique* [2005] 'Sulphuric Acid'), Chloé Delaume (*J'habite*

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dans la télévision [2006] 'I Live in the Television') and Jean-Hubert Gailliot (*L'Hacienda*, 2004), reality TV has also become a recent literary preoccupation. On the one hand, reality TV appears to insult the intelligence of the contemporary writer who then proposes a morbid and terrifying version of the shows in order to condemn them, as is the case for Hervier, Chidlin, or Nothomb, whose work will be discussed at length here. On the other hand, such reinvented shows certainly defy the laws of reality but, more importantly, they seem to force the practice of writing into a deep renewal of its forms and the novel into a hybrid genre, as the second part of this essay shows in novels by Jean-Phillipe Toussaint and Chloé Delaume. For the first group of novels, which directly applies the blueprint of the game show on the narrative grid, reality TV is strictly a narrative device; for the second group, reality TV not only looms large but affects style and composition, with a fragmented plot and a renovated writing style.

From the first group of novels, this essay examines *Acide sulfurique*, a fantasy-like "uchronia" by Nothomb, who chooses the concentration camp as her historical model to create a terrifying televised game, aptly named "Concentration." During this game, viewers are invited to vote for the elimination (literal) of one of the young and beautiful prisoners, one who would show signs of weakness and deterioration under the violent watch (and whips) of sadistic *kapos*, guards in charge of the camp. The spectators' vote is final and the punishment is a death sentence usually performed behind closed doors. When the protagonist, Pannonique, described as the strongest, smartest, and most attractive detainee, is finally voted to die, she chooses to die publicly on screen, which makes the ratings go through the roof. One hundred percent of viewers are glued to the screen to watch Pannonique, symbol of beauty and strength, die before their eyes. Nothomb ironically deflects the shock and tension inherent in such an event with her signature biting humor, subverting the absurd cruelty of the death episode in the reality show which, she writes, was "…watched by every breathing human and living being. The blind, the deaf, the anchorites, the religious, street poets, small children, newlyweds, pets" (175).[1] The impossibility of the scene is evacuated in the enumeration: all, down to the last soul, even those for whom the spectacle would normally be a daunting,

not to say impossible, task because they are either animals, or physically challenged, or too young, or just married, or retired from the civilized (or uncivilized) world, or even morally bound by their religious beliefs. All, without exception, are anonymous witnesses to the most sadistic of all spectacles: "purity executed by vice! Innocence released to torture" (179). Nothomb places the subject of her novel in constant excess of (in)humanity, in a world where televised images have outgrown human suffering, to offer the unimaginable intemperance of the spectacle: "Then came the time when suffering was no longer enough: the audience demanded its spectacle" (9), announces Nothomb in the opening of the book.

Nothomb's statement on the doomed days of the spectacle is but a futuristic pronouncement on the widespread idea that we already live in a society of spectacle where visual addictions are common, and, for many, devastating. In 1967, Guy Debord, the situationist thinker and visionary of the many dangers of a spectacular society wrote: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (qtd. in Mirzoeff, 142). We may question Debord's notion of a "directly lived" life as a notion that cannot exist outside the realm of fantasy or fiction. Indeed, a simulacrum of life can be read in books like Nothomb's where life (and death) becomes acutely real and precious within the fiction that bears its extremes. Ironically, Debord's pessimistic view of the spectacle reads like a book of science fiction, as it tells the story of a long gone form of actual life, one that has morphed into a world of representation. In fact, his somber proposition about a receding life, if life at all, is dead-on correct: nothing in the spectacle claims life better than its representation, and when the images are abusive, life may become monstrous yet exciting, or excitingly real, for the viewers jolted back into feeling life through the now revealed, exposed violence.[2]

Reality TV is the electronic and tele-visual symptom of a society dominated by the image, reflecting the fact that humans have become image-addicts thinking and living first by way of the visual. To further accelerate the dissemination and consumption of images, new technologies have filled everyday lives with a multitude of screens. In his reflection on reality TV, *Télémorphose*, cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard explains that today total reality reaches us primarily by way of screens in which we eventually become pris-

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oners: dependent, addicted and separated from a direct social life: from the camcorder to the cellular phone, from the computer to the television, screens rule our life. For Baudrillard, there is no longer a separation between the screen and the world. In fact, the world becomes real or hyper-real on and through the screen(s): "Today, the screen is not television, but reality itself, what we could call an integral reality" (48). However, a distinction must be made between the macro world and the micro world offered on screen. On the one hand the big wide world of current affairs, on the other the miniature world from inside the apartment of a reality show like *Big Brother*, or *Loft Story* in its French version. The world, or world events, becomes strangely real to the viewers by way of images of war casualties, terrorist actions, and live assassinations shown on our screens, and somehow thus fulfills the noble idea that the public has been informed, even if by simulacra. As far as reality TV is concerned, the aim is less noble, to say the least, as it is the pure banality of life that, via the screen, enters viewers' living rooms. A few young preselected candidates with mundane and uninteresting preoccupations interact within the strict confines of an apartment equipped with multiple cameras always in operation so as to submit all details of their ordinary life to the voyeuristic audience who hopes to catch the lowest form of behavior, so low that anyone watching can fare well in comparison and instantly feel better. Watching becomes comparing, judging and, eventually, breathing life into the viewers. Baudrillard speaks about this degraded form of humanity as a self-destruction of our kind: "… the immersion in banality is the equivalent to a suicide of the species" (45). To him, reality is "on its way out," leaving the hyper-real in charge of our sociality and sexuality. The banality of reality TV and its success then appear as symptoms of our mourning for the passing of the real. As the viewers enjoy watching reality shows, they are at the same time collectively celebrating a sense of grieving for a life that is no more. It is this feeling of despair, this twilight (49) of the near end of the real that makes its way into the literature inspired by the seductive power of television in general, and tragic fascination for reality TV in particular.

Baudrillard's question of what is real in reality TV is also at the heart of recent filmic representation of reality TV. Peter Weir's 1998 film, *The Truman Show*, is about a man, Truman (true – man to

himself, but unreal as he is born out of a television script), televised 24/7 for a fascinated and loyal audience, whose entire life has been fabricated by a TV producer with the symbolic name of Christof. In Weir's film, Truman is a pure product of televised scheming: he was born, grew up, got married, and found a job on an island that he never left and could never leave, manipulated as he was by all the other actors, equipped with hidden cameras, all aware and participating in the subterfuge while Truman remained unaware of his television life. That is, until he finds the courage to leave the island; his boat eventually hits the outside shell of his televised world and he finds a way out of television bubble into the real world. Before leaving his fake world he will hear for the first time the voice of Christof, who will try to reason with him:

> Christof: Truman, you can speak. I can hear you.
> Truman: Who are you?
> Christof: I am the creator of a television show that gives hope, joy, and inspiration to millions.
> Truman: Then who am I?
> Christof: You're the star.
> Truman: Was nothing real?
> Christof: You were real. That's what made you so good to watch. Listen to me, Truman. There is no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. Same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear.

A quintessential product of reality TV, Truman finally decides to weigh in on his own destiny as he turns his back on his clean and fearless hoax of a life, choosing the lies and deceits of the real world over the perfectly happy unreal world of the television show. He chooses freedom in an imperfect world over the dungeon of his perfect televised life.

There is a concurrent idea about the almighty power of scriptwriters in Tonino Benacquista's 1997 novel, *Saga*, about the changed destiny of four young scriptwriters who are specifically hired as a last resort to write a mediocre program, something to fill in unimportant airtime, and find unexpected success along the way: "Besides god and scriptwriters, do you know of any other jobs where you can manipulate people's destiny?" (71).

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In Jean-Phillipe Toussaint's 1997 minimalistic novel, *La Télévision*, the protagonist offers a viewer's perspective on the gripping attraction of television. Like Truman, he tries to reboot his destiny by escaping the world of television in which he feels imprisoned. *La Télévision* displays the anguish of a young scholar caught in his own addiction to television and the dire consequences of this dependency on his inspiration and passion for his work in art history, as he struggles to find a way out of the dry spell that is plaguing his research. The seductive and dangerous powers of television pursue him even as he decides from the onset of the novel to quit watching cold turkey, in the hope that he will be able to stand by his pledge, thus curing his visual addiction and finally restoring his desire to write. Even after his initial determination to place his image-saturated mind in remission, television does not go away that easily. Everything around him, surveillance cameras, computers, even the darkened screen of his own television, continue to consume his mental energy and impair his ability to pursue his research and to write. The screens are perceived as omnipresent and unavoidable, and as the main cause of a full-blown postmodern tragedy that has reduced the spirit of man to a passive state, a scattered brain, a depressed self, and an empty imagination. In a novel that at times appears more like a non-fiction study, an observation of the progression and/or regression of the mind into a TV-induced coma, the viewers are able to measure the true risk of the slow dulling of an exceptionally bright mind in a prose that confesses the absurdity of watching for the sake of watching: "turning on the TV in the evening and watching everything there was to see, my mind perfectly empty, never choosing any particular program, simply watching everything that came my way, the movement, the glimmering lights, the variety" (7). The narrator admits that his problem is less an uncontrollable passion for the actual content of any programming than an attraction to the comfort of screen fluorescence. He is actually able to measure the total absurdity of programs like *Baywatch* that the people around his neighborhood in Berlin seem to enjoy. In the end, the writer's block experienced by the narrator as he confronts his television demons ironically becomes exceptional material for the writing of Toussaint's *La Télévision*. It is the energy hidden behind the forces of despair that propels Toussaint in the

heart of his semi-scientific story. Such drive behind the vacuity and vacancy of the self produces a novel that chronicles the movement of writing, or lack thereof, in a world impoverished by an excess of televisual banality.

There is a similar yet much heightened level of energy in the writing of Chloé Delaume's experimental novel on television, *J'habite dans la télévision*. Where Toussaint's television puts on trial man's weakness as he constantly teeters on the brink of a comfortable state of uselessness and immobility ("comfortably numb" in Pink Floyd's phrase), Delaume's television is the optimistic object of an experiment performed within a pre-established framework and precise parameters. It is possible to imagine her directly answering Toussaint's existential questioning about life through television when she writes: "To the question: is this experiment an excellent excuse to [do]? fuck all on the couch, I answer in the negative. It isn't a question of living in front of the television. It's a matter of living IN it" (45). So it is with an acute sense of determination and a certain level of scientific control that the narrator launches her research on her own life spent in symbiosis with the television. Indeed, like Toussaint's novel which begins with the narrator swearing that he will no longer watch television, Delaume's *J'habite dans la télévision* begins with a contract: the narrator postulates that she will live in constant presence of the television and at the same time write her auto-fiction while under the influence of the screen. Over a determined period of twenty-two months she will have no other activities besides watching TV.

She approaches her novel and sets up its premise like a scientist would a lab report. In *Télémorphose*, Baudrillard writes of the sort of human experiment that is central to all reality shows: "the 'Loft' ranks as a universal metaphor for the modern being, that is the digital being now transformed into his own white lab mouse" (29). In her novels in general and this one in particular, Delaume volunteers to become this white mouse under observation as she throws her own self into the heart of the experiment and lives to write about it. She thus fulfills three roles: the scientist observing the lab mouse, the mouse itself plunged into the world of television, and the writer interacting with both the scientist and the mouse.

This schizophrenic triangulation could not possibly produce a

linear narration with a clear and systematic style. In fact, Delaume's novel is not easy to read, experimental as it is in content as well as in its form. She bypasses some of the basic principles of narration and style as her story follows her triple life in full symbiosis with the vagaries of the omnipresent screen. Sentences remain unfinished, single words appear on their own, thoughts seem interrupted, excerpts from televised programs pop out intermittently, words and phrases are caught in the televised moment, bursts of lyrical writing mix with familiar language. In addition the reader witnesses a constant observation of the body and soul at different stages of the experiment, erratic reaction of the self caught in interaction with the programs, scientific division and numbering of chapters, called "pieces," and finally the reader is guided outside the novel itself to the electronic references for a concurrent and complementary project of digitally recorded mixed voices on the Internet. The novel also crosses different genres: the diary, scientific observations and remarks, note-taking, quotes and aphorisms, linguistic study, literary and film criticism, police report, filing paperwork (the book begins with a governmental file identification acknowledging the subject under investigation, and ends on another filing document of the same format but with the addition of a committee report presenting the uselessness of keeping records of the experiment, and recommending the destruction of the book). The variety offered at all levels of writing in *J'habite dans la télévision* makes for an unusually energetic reading: there is not a dull moment as the reader is constantly offered a new situation, a new style and a new genre.

This novel literally changes everything. It reinvents imagination and narration in contemporary fiction. Here, imagination is not tested with eyes shut as was the case with the surrealists who turned inward to explore the infinite world and combination of images generated by the unconscious, yet it still qualifies as experimental, in the literal sense because it represents an experiment about an experiment, and Delaume performs the triple action of being in, out and beyond television with her eyes wide open. She takes the story beyond the limits of the possible and, by the end of the book, she literally acts out the metaphor in the title and lives in the television, as she is swallowed by her screen, eaten alive by the television turned cannibal. In an act of something we might call meta-science fic-

tion, her body is teleported inside the walls of an actual reality show called "La Star Académie" where the action takes place in a chateau. "Star Academy" is a hybrid genre of reality TV, somewhere between *Loft Story* (*Big Brother*) and *La Nouvelle Star* (*American Idol*), between the constant spying on candidates' everyday life, private and public, and their demanding preparation to perform on primetime television, in order to become the new best recording artist of the year. However, instead of being Chloé Delaume, now on the other side of the screen, and an actual participant in the show alongside the other hopefuls, she defies human character identification to become a more spectral life form, somewhere between the human world and the world of things. Her body becomes the organs, the heart, the blood and veins of the Chateau, its omnipresent sense of prying and living as a body of organs and organs only, a creature only recognizable as the avatar of what once was Chloé Delaume, a pure lyrical incarnation as demonstrated in the following passage:

> I am the aorta of the Chateau. For now, I pulsate inside the walls. Bright silver, I wind and slither between the stones, out of the beams around the plastic chandelier I swerve with mechanical easiness. I am no longer disjointed, I am an element.
>
> I am a pulmonary valve, a bright red cell, a main brain vein, the end of awkwardness. I am not a prisoner of television. I am not in the Village either, I am and I say red cell, I mix with cement. I am the passenger of a raft frozen into eternal return. Sea foam shaking the walls of the operation. I am the aorta of the Chateau.
>
> I am a fertile and chicken-fenced transfusion. An abracadabra-esque vein that devours princesses and vomits very expensive pumpkins. (156)

The poetic quality of this passage endows the book with yet another genre: the prose poem or poetic prose. Filled with a hodgepodge of recognizable references to art, philosophy, and children's tales, with metaphors of a ubiquitous and fast moving organism, of a pulsating blood supply and system representing the very energy of life, this prose poem uses the lyrical voice to ascertain the infallible literary position of the narrator, a position that remains strong and unchanged by the transformation of the character, from human to

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post-human, from a passive soul in front of the television to an active and vibrant force inside the television. If television and reality TV have bewitched and stunted the scholar in Toussaint's novel, they have taken the narrator in Delaume's and placed her on the other side of the screen as a living force that gives originality to her auto-fiction. It is as if by entering the closed and claustrophobic televised world of reality TV, the narrator paradoxically found literary freedom and emancipation and in the process was able to rebuild another type of life for herself, an active and creative life filled with infinite possibilities.[3]

The two models of literary representation for life in and out of screens, from television to computers, from reality TV to video games, whether direct application or writing experiment, have produced a number of books interested in exploring the ever growing interaction of human and screen. Whether they bring to the fore a cynical and banal world or a renewed literary energy, ubiquitous and multiform screens seem to have injected a new life into the world of fiction where images and imagination meet again with a renewed sense of creativity. Screens may be one of the most productive and diverse literary objects for novelists tuned in to the modernity of the third millennium.

Notes

1 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2 There are, however, extreme contemporary cases where life returns from its world of representation as actual death, when the excessiveness of the image goes beyond the privacy of its medium and exposes the individual in a relentless and unbearable state of shame. Today, under the watchful gaze of the big cyber eye, the viewers may fall victim to the constant invasion of all of life's moments, public and private. There is such a societal passion for a mediated reality by way of computers, cellular phones and other electronic tools and gadgets that some, especially the young, easily fall prey to the hyper-real world they generate. For many, screens have replaced human interaction and they live through the thrill of communicating even their most private moments by way of electronic images. Touching the screen has come to replace the human touch. A new practice, known as "sexting," has, in its extreme cases, definitely added a morbid overlay to the fiction of images. Sexting consists of sending instantaneous moments of private life to a boyfriend or girlfriend, nude pictures taken with phones, anytime during the day, in private spaces such as the bathroom or the shower.

For this screen-addicted new generation, acts of sexting are seen as an unparalleled proof of love, as it assumes the full trust of the receiver who is supposed to guard and keep the intimate image for her personal pleasure. However, upon breaking up, the photos become a liability, and scorned or sadistic ex-partners have used them for personal revenge by mass-distributing the compromising images. Some victims have not been able to endure the pain of full disclosure of their privacy, and have resorted to suicide to escape the social shame attached to their overexposed intimacy. With sexting, the quintessential exchange of "electronic love," life has definitely resurfaced in its most fatal aspect. It has fought its way back against the tidal wave of contemporary representation and spectacle, to an ultimate endgame: death itself. No books of fiction have yet based their story around the practice of sexting. However, if it reads here like a trashy beach book or a bad thriller, then it may also be a prelude to its introduction into the world of literature. It might just be a matter of time.

3 With her 2003 book, *Corpus Simsi*, Delaume had already developed her writing around the full investment of herself into another life, a second life, or an alternate life, in another type of experiment where this lab mouse of auto-fiction creates and follows her avatar inspired by the popular video game *The Sims*, a game of simulation where virtual life comes to replace real life.

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